

AGASSIZ NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY COMMITTEE

OPEN SPACE

Neighborhood Study Committee:	Dave Wood, Miriam Goldberg, Amy Barad, Joel Bard, Fred Meyer, Ross Hoffman
Absent:	Debby Galef
Community Development Department:	Stuart Dash, Venita Mathias
Harvard University:	Travis McCready

Stuart Dash, Director of Community Planning in the City's Community Development Department, presented an overview of the City's Open Space policy.

Open Space Committee:

The City's Open Space Committee directs open space in the City. The committee is composed of 15 representatives from the city manager's office, CDD, DPW, the water dept and other departments that work with open space. The committee was formed about 12 years ago when it was suggested that open space considerations in the City was not well coordinated among city departments. Over the years, various changes have been made to the way open space decisions are handled in the city. About 2 years ago, DPW changed the way they maintain open space. The city was divided into quadrants and parks staff was made responsible for specific areas of the City. The change was in response to concern that there was not a sense of ownership of the parks by public works crews working in the parks. Maintenance of city parks varied widely based on many variables. Greg Garber was hired to oversee all the maintenance of city parks and has improved the maintenance system.

Open space is hard to come by in Cambridge and there are few opportunities to add to the system. One of the big additions over the last thirty years was Danehy Park that occurred from a combination of events in the City. The City dump was closed and the red line extension was being built which resulted in large amounts of dirt that was used to cap the city dump. The City is also upgrading existing parks. Replacing structures with new equipment using modern materials. Parks are upgraded according to need and condition of structures.

The Green Ribbon Committee

The Green Ribbon Committee was appointed by the City Manager to look at the acquisition of open space and just before the committee was formed, the City Council voted to put \$2M a year into an open space acquisition fund. The Green Ribbon Committee was formed to set up criteria for acquiring open space. The notion was, if a certain amount of money was available to the city and open space opportunities came up what criteria would you use to purchase property? The City Manager makes final decisions on acquisition informed by the direction of the City Council. The City Council has adopted the Green Ribbon Committee recommendations with some additional comments.

The increase of soccer's popularity has put a strain on the city's parks wearing out grass at a faster rate than sports such as baseball. Youth and adult soccer teams are using fields in the city very actively. The high school is also looking for fields to play sports such as field hockey. There is an increasing need for fields in the city at a time when it is very difficult to acquire new fields.

Green Ribbon Committee discussions:

The Committee looked at categories of parks and size of parks. First, the committee looked at tot lots, neighborhoods parks, community parks, and large urban parks. The committee looked at population characteristics of the city and mapped population density, where children 14-18 years old reside, and where children less than 13 years old reside, using 1990 census data. To some extent, the data may have changed proportionately around the city. The maps will be reviewed once the 2000 census data comes out.

The Committee looked at the highest density of low to moderate-income residents in the city. The Committee felt this was important because, everything else being equal, residents of low to moderate-income have less opportunities to engage their own open space whether it's leaving town for the cape, or driving out to the country, or having a larger yard.

Tot lots throughout the city were mapped by a quarter mile radius. The Committee considered that everyone in the city should be able to access a tot lot by a quarter mile walk. Cambridge does pretty well in that account.

Park classifications

Neighborhood park - the kind of park that can handle a ball game or soccer game informally. A park that is not heavily programmed for use by sports teams. A park that residents can walk to in the evening to play ball with the kids. The Committee looked at both quarter and half mile radius for access to parks.

Community park - parks which may have 2-3 fields which are programmed for team sports which may draw residents from adjoining neighborhoods. Parents may drive their children to the park or a child may ride his bike to the park for a soccer or baseball game. The committee mapped the walking radius and how close they are to subway lines and bus routes. Not all community parks are created equal. For example, Sennott Park located in the Area Four neighborhood was classified as both a neighborhood and community park. Sennott is obviously not as large as Russell Field located in the North Cambridge neighborhood.

Large urban parks - 3 parks in the city were classified in this category. Danehy park 57 acres with several fields drawing people in from around the City and region to play out of town games. Fresh Pond Reservation is a different large urban park with a golf course and pathways. Magazine Beach is an emerging large urban park especially with the city's recent agreement with the MDC to take over some of the operations of the beach and to have first priority for scheduling of activities on the Beach.

Natural Resources and Trail areas

Alewife Reservation is a little known natural area in the City located behind Alewife T Station. It can also be accessed by the parking garage or pathway. As part of an agreement worked out with a recent commercial development in the area at the end of Cambridge Park Drive, pedestrian access is available at the end of the Drive. There are ongoing discussions with Arthur D. Little on the other side of the River to improve their side of the Reservation. There is an active group called Friends of Alewife Brook Reservation who have been working for years to improve the Reservation.

Types of uses

The Committee talked about informal uses of open space such as reading, playing frisbee, walking etc. The committee also mapped out where high school sports take place and how they related to space that was available

Green Ribbon Committee recommendations: Areas of need:

The committee looked at all types of parks and made recommendations on each park showing areas of need and areas of priorities. Porter Square was shown to have no open space at all within a 1/4-mile radius. The Committee considered it a priority. It was shown to be a high-density area with high-density low-income residents and children. The Agassiz neighborhood was also shown to be high density with very little open space. The Agassiz area was one of the top priority areas recommended for a community park.

Park priorities were mapped out based on where children lived and where parks were available. Priorities and recommendations were given taking into account opportunity,

other changes that occur, and the possibility to add additional parks. Listing an area as high priority doesn't necessarily mean open space will be added in the short term.

The Committee mapped out a 1/4-mile radius around each census block in the City and determined how many people and how much open space was in each radius. Porter Square registered as zero acres per thousand people. The map reveals 2-4 thousand people per acre near Danehy Park and 4 to 10 thousand people per acre near Russell Field and Danehy Park. The map shows 10 or more acres per thousand people near Fresh Pond.

The Committee mapped out bus lines that have 10-minute headways. The City's transportation Department feels that buses that arrive every 10 minutes are workable transportation and those that arrive every half hour are marginal to get people to a playing field. The Committee recommended that 3 or 4 playing fields be added to the Eastern half of the City recognizing that it would take some travel time to get to Danehy Park.

The Committee did not see cemeteries and private open space as open space considerations.

The Report will be helpful to the City Manager and the City Council as opportunities for adding open space arise and they will be able to quickly act based on priorities and recommendations listed by the Committee.

Open Space opportunities

Open space opportunities arise in various ways and it is helpful for neighborhood residents to keep an eye out. A tot lot is needed in Porter Square that would be the size of a house lot. There may be an opportunity with Harvard and Lesley University where a trade of property could be made. Open space could possibly be built over the existing T line. Committee members also advocated for flowered open spaces, and sitting areas along the edges of parks. Sidewalks and streets are part of the open space system and are probably one of the biggest source of open space in a city like Cambridge. Rooftops of buildings have also been considered as a source of open space.

The parking lots around the Porter Exchange may lend themselves to open space opportunities. Church school property is sometimes made available and the City has been using that resource to temporarily house schools, for example, the Fitzgerald School relocation to St. Mary's in the Area Four neighborhood.

Travis McCready said that Harvard is committed to placing the Oxford Street parking lots underground, which would create green space opportunities

Park design work for the city is generally done by the Community Development Department's landscape architect. Sometimes larger parks are designed by outside firms, for example, Danehy Park. In the Area Four Neighborhood where CDD offices are

temporarily located, property was acquired to create open space and an outside firm was hired to do the design. The Maynard Academy paved area will be a redesigned open space area and the newly acquired Squirrel Brand property will have public open space and community gardens. The DPW is working with MWRA to clean up sewer connections and one of the connections leads to Alewife which would make the Alewife Reservation cleaner.

Questions and Answer session:

Q. Where is Agassiz school in capital budget process?

A. Venita will check and let you know.

Q. What areas in the city are available for open space.

A. There are still some areas in the eastern portion of the city that have open parking lots. They are not inexpensive. In northern areas of the city there are large vacant spaces. Guilford has recently acquired 50 acres of land in the northeastern part of the city near the Lechmere Station and is proposing to develop housing in the area.

Q. What is the status of the lawsuit around access to Sacramento field? A. We will ask Don Drisdell.

Q. Is maintenance contracted out on Sacramento Field?

A. City staff will find out and inform the committee.

Q..How does the City's program for acquisition of property for open space relate to the Community Preservation Act?

A. The City Council is working with the City Manager on that issue. The Community Preservation Act says that if you are willing to levy a surcharge on city property taxes the state will match it with state funds. The city already puts in tax dollars for open space and affordable housing at a much higher rate than other cities and towns in MA. If it means that there will be an additional surcharge over and beyond what the city is doing now, the city will have to look into how to get credit in the form of state matching funds.